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Kentucky's Public Interest Pay Phone Program
By Mark David Goss, Chairman & Ellen Williams, Vice Chairman
Kentucky Public Service Commission

No industry is changing as quickly as telecommunications. One of the most visible changes in that industry is in what you don't see anymore – a pay telephone at every gas station and in every corner store.

Payphones are dwindling for two reasons – the popularity of cellular telephones (168 million subscribers in the United States today, up from 10 million a dozen years ago) and other wireless devices, and changes in federal laws that have deregulated the telephone industry.

Rapid change of this kind poses a challenge for regulatory agencies such as the Kentucky Public Service Commission. It's important that our policies keep pace with what's going on in the real world.

That is why the PSC recently took steps to modernize the requirements for the availability of payphones in Kentucky.

Local telephone companies had been required to maintain one payphone in each of their exchanges, which corresponds roughly to the area represented by the first three digits of a seven-digit local phone number. It was up to the phone company to pick the location of that phone.

A review by the PSC determined that this requirement is outmoded and does not always result in payphones being placed where they are needed, particularly in the rural parts of our state. The PSC decided instead to establish a "public interest payphone" program.

This decision was supported by the Kentucky League of Cities, the Metro Human Needs Alliance of Louisville and the city of Winchester. The Kentucky Payphone Association has promised to help implement the program.

This program establishes a procedure for businesses, organizations and local governments to seek the placement of payphones in locations where they are needed, but aren't currently available. If a PSC review determines a phone is needed, the PSC will work to find a payphone provider to serve the location.

A similar program has worked well in Indiana and other states. Providers have willingly come forward to place phones in those locations where a need had been identified.

We believe the same will be true in Kentucky. If it is not, then the PSC will move to not only place phones in needed locations, but also to establish a mechanism to pay for them.

The application form for public interest payphones is available on the PSC Web site at psc.ky.gov. Or you can request a form by writing to the PSC at 211 Sower Boulevard, Frankfort, KY 40601.

The PSC wants everyone in Kentucky, whether at home or on the road, to have access to phone service to the greatest extent possible. We believe that this new program offers the best way to ensure that payphones remain available in the locations where they are most needed.

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